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ABSTRACT

Electronic tutoring can be valuable for writers and should be offered in more university settings, not just in computer labs. Among its advantages is the speed with which commentary can be returned by e-mail. Other advantages were evident in a reciprocal tutoring relationship carried on by two academics in different states. They chose not to edit or evaluate each other's papers but to comment on them in a descriptive manner, an approach that does much to lessen the pain on the part of the writer whose paper is being critiqued. Some advantages and disadvantages of different kinds of electronic commentary are as follows: (1) annotation balloons, which do not disturb the text but are supported by only certain kinds of software and cannot be sent over internet; (2) voice annotations, which preserve the power and subtlety of the human voice but again are supported by only certain kinds of software and cannot be sent over internet; and (3) notes in a different color, which are highly visible but cannot be printed as separate text or intrude into the original text. The chief benefit of a long-term tutoring relationship carried on over the computer is that it creates a degree of support typically unknown in tutoring labs or classrooms. The writer's knowing that he or she has the support of the reader, knowing that he or she is not there to criticize, enables him or her to get past merely reading responses as "do you like me" clues. (TB)

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Electronic Tutoring: Long Distance and Long Term

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Denise R. Stephenson & Bob Mayberry

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Abstract

For the past two years we have carried on a tutoring relationship through e-mail. We've shared drafts of manuscripts, requests for help, responses, advice and even arguments. Our presentation outlines the advantages of immediate written feedback and the profound learning which occurs when tutoring takes place between the same two people over a long period of time. We also weigh the advantages and disadvantages of certain electronic choices for both tutor and student.

The most important "lesson" we learned was how writers acquire a reader's vision, that is, how we learn to read our own writing from a reader's perspective. This act is essential to the process of rewriting because it provides us with a new context in which to re-vision our own prose. Electronic tutoring made that process highly visible.

Our experience suggests the importance of devising classroom and laboratory methods which tutors can use to enhance the ability of students to re-vision their writing. Some of the methods we describe are limited to e-mail; others are not.

Researchers have identified the inhibitions which inexperienced writers face when asked to do substantial rewrites (Rose, Sommers, etc.). We are exploring specific tutorial activities that help empower students to consciously and dramatically alter their drafts.

Preface

What follows is a detailed outline of the presentation we made at the College Composition & Communication Convention in Nashville, March 1994. This is not the typical conference paper because we did not *read a paper*. Reading papers aloud to a convention audience strikes us as the least interesting means of presentation. Why not just make copies of the paper for everyone to read at their leisure? The chief advantage afforded by live presentations at conferences like CCCC is the opportunity for discussion. Because we're most interested in dialog, we presented these notes extemporaneously, inviting questions as we went along, and

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engaging discussion whenever we could. The presentation took far less than the twenty minutes allotted, which permitted further interaction with the audience. We invite our readers to continue the dialog by contacting us via e-mail: **TFBM@acad1.alaska.edu**

Brief Outline

1. How our e-mail relationship changed over several years
2. Advantages & disadvantages of electronic means of responding to written texts
3. Why we chose not to edit text
4. Long term effects
5. Acquiring a reader's vision
6. Conclusions

Presentation

1. How our e-mail relationship changed over several years:

The electronic tutoring relationship began when Denise moved from Las Vegas, where Bob lived, to New Mexico to start a doctoral program in American Studies. After writing a paper for a class, Denise would send it on e-mail with a long note at the beginning identifying her major concerns. She'd describe what kinds of things Bob should pay special attention to. In an early draft this would often consist of concerns with flow and argument; in later drafts, details of punctuation and word choice became more important.

Usually within a day Bob would read the paper. He would annotate the text with questions and concerns. He would not edit; we agreed on that. But the ways in which he responded were often in more depth and specificity than usually occurs in a face-to-face situation. (See section 3 below for examples.)

This pattern continued for three years of e-mail tutoring, but during the third year Bob sent a paper, in several stages, to Denise for her comments. This reversal of roles dramatized what we'd been saying to each other about the pleasures and difficulties of sending and receiving this kind of feedback on our writing. For the first time, we saw the tutorial relationship and the writing/reading process from both ends of the electronic connection.

2. The advantages and disadvantages of electronic means of responding to written texts:

•*annotation balloons attached to text*: do not disturb the text, are not intrusive, can be ignored, allow a more discursive response than marginalia, can be printed out as a separate set of notes; chief disadvantage is that balloons are supported only by certain software (Microsoft Word, for example) and cannot be sent over Internet;

•*voice annotations*: preserve the power and subtlety of the human voice, convey tone, invite humor; supported only by certain software (Microsoft Word), cannot be sent over Internet, consume RAM, slow to open, cannot be printed;

•*notes in different color within text*: highly visible, easily read, easy to compose on color monitor; cannot be printed as separate notes, intrude into text, cannot be ignored even if writer wishes to, cannot be sent over Internet.

3. Why we chose not to edit text:

We didn't fix errors, but limited ourselves to brief descriptive responses. We couldn't ask questions like we would face-to-face. We also couldn't point to problem areas; we had to explain what problems we saw. In some ways this was a plus because the electronic tutor is compelled to be more explicit than a regular tutor, which means an even deeper learning about writing and reading for both writer and tutor. In the electronic environment, sensitivity as to how to suggest certain changes takes on a new dimension. We were reluctant to give directions or suggest changes without demonstrating the reasons for them or how the change would alter the text. We saw our responses as persuasive rhetoric—not solely as information—as descriptive rather than evaluative statements.

In the classroom or in the tutorial lab, the text is never just a product on a page; writing is always connected viscerally to the writer because writers are emotionally invested in their texts. The act of revision requires just such connection. So we can expect writers to respond emotionally to commentary on their writing. Asking them *not* to is tantamount to asking them not to invest

themselves in what they write. But inviting writers to see their text as a reader might avoids such disconnection while helping them to imagine alternative readings of their own work.

Descriptive responses, rather than evaluative ones, also allowed Denise to see the conventions clearly: "This was a big part of me asserting my own voice and demanding it get a hearing, even when the reader demonstrated to me that it was outside of conventions. The ability to defend my words or phrases or sentences is an important part of the process for the writer. This kind of reader feedback helped me gain confidence."

What follows are two example sentences [in bold], the tutor's responses [in brackets], and revised versions of the sentences:

(a) original sentence:

Unfortunately, most of these elements lack acceptability in the dominant culture.

[Oh, Denise, Denise. Sometimes I ache to hear you acquiring the academic voice at the same time you argue so powerfully against the academic structure. "Lack acceptability" attributes the absence to the noun: the elements lack something. Rather than saying "the elements are not accepted," or even better, "academics do not accept these elements," both of which make it clear that it's not the character of the elements that's in question here, but the predisposition of academics to accept or not certain elements. It's just like saying women lack a penis: defining one group by the misperceptions of another.]

rewrite:

Unfortunately, the dominant culture does not readily accept these elements of orality.

(b) original:

Sexual containment was also a necessary component of family stability.

[This transition seems weak and obvious, especially since the obvious

link lies in the previous quote: homosexuality. Something like, The threat of adolescent homosexuality was not the only form of sexual behavior that had to be contained in order to maintain family stability. Too wordy, but you get the idea.]

1st re-write:

Raising contained children was not the only factor of family stability-sexual containment was also critical.

[Raising contained children: very strange phrase. I imagine those kids kept in boxes in Iowa. How about "Containing children" since raising is not the issue you want to focus on.]

2nd re-write:

Containing children was not the only factor of family stability-sexual containment was also critical.

4. Long term effects:

Tutors see responses as value-free, neither positive nor negative, or as strictly about writing not the writer. But authors see almost any comment as evaluative: how do you like me/my creation? Long term tutorial relationships create a degree of support typically unknown in tutoring labs or classrooms. Knowing you have the support of a reader, knowing she/he is not there to criticize, enables us to get past merely reading responses as "do you like me" clues.

Denise experienced this when Bob responded to her drafts: "Sometimes Bob thought he'd been helpful and kind in his responses when I was about in tears. But for me the supportive atmosphere of a long-term tutorial relationship included the little asides that are purely personal. The shorthand we developed over the years also took the edge off the personal feelings, making light and familiar what might otherwise have been read as critical." (See the first example in section 3.)

Bob discovered much the same thing when Denise responded to his article: "I heard in the explanations of her comments that she didn't see how evaluative they were to me. I read the gaps between words, interpreted what she had left unsaid."

Long term tutorial relationships create incredibly rich contexts for writing and responding, as well as interpreting those responses.

5. Acquiring a reader's vision:

The process described above taught us to read our own writing from a reader's perspective. We learned to read our texts through each other's eyes.

Rather than see only our latest draft with its incorporated changes, each time we reread our manuscripts we reread all the commentary as well. The physical distance between us made it impossible to infer from the look on our reader's face, so we paid closer attention to that commentary. Being simultaneously both writers and tutors highlighted the way we viewed writing, exposed our predilections and blind spots, and illuminated the differences between our different readings of the same text. We were made doubly aware of our roles as readers and writers. Without intending it, we began to see our texts through our reader's eyes.

Acquisition of a reader's vision is essential to the process of rewriting because it provides writers with new contexts in which to re-vision their prose. Electronic tutoring makes that process highly visible because the tutoring is *in* writing, so the act of writing is foregrounded.

6. Conclusions:

We believe electronic tutoring can be valuable for writers and should be offered in more university settings, not just in computer labs. Among its advantages is the speed with which commentary can be returned by e-mail. Sometimes Denise wanted feedback right away because she wanted to continue writing but was stuck or uncertain. Having feedback available almost instantly, certainly within a day, makes revision much easier. The advantages we've noted, especially the way electronic tutoring makes visible the writing process and our roles in it, suggest that the lessons we learned from our experiences tutoring and being tutored on-line might apply in the classroom as well. We suggest the following goals for tutors and writing instructors:

- *Respect the student text* by not marking it in the usual ways, but rather explaining why we read the way we do.

- *Treat students as peers,* one writer to another, rather than behaving as if we know some secret about writing or do not struggle with our own writing in exactly the same way our students do.

- *Provide "readerly" response* by responding to content like most readers do, rather than "teacherly" response, which is focused on errors.

- *Arrange stable, long-term pairs* of readers/writers in our classes and writing labs so the kind of trust and intimacy we've described can have a chance of evolving.

These suggestions are consistent with a student-centered pedagogy which respects student texts. If anything, our experiences with electronic tutoring enhanced our commitment to empowering students both in the classroom and tutorial lab. When readers resist the impulse to edit student papers and instead explain to writers how they respond to texts as they read them, they provide the necessary encouragement for writers to re-vision their texts.